How to Read Chord Charts

Learning to read chord charts is **fun and easy**. It will open a new world of songs to you, as you will now be able to unlock the "code". I use charts all the time in the studio, live and as a teacher, especially for songs that I am not familiar with, or don't have the time and need for memorizing. This method of playing music is not too dissimilar to preparing a speech and then reading it, or referring to your notes throughout the speech. Most bands that play together a lot don't use charts because they have played the songs enough times to have them memorized.

There are many chart types, but only a few that you see often. The type that we will be covering today, is the most common and most useful. The charts we will be covering are standard and "number" charts. There are several things that need to be covered before we can unlock these charts.

Meter – Most songs begin and end with the same "meter". Meter is defined as: rhythm that continuously repeats a single basic pattern. About 99% of today's music is in "4", which means that the basic pattern repeats every four beats. Most other tunes are in 8 or 6, where the pattern repeats every 8 or 6 beats respectively.

Every now and then, you will find a song written in an "odd" time signature like 5 or 7. "Money" by Pink Floyd is in 7. If our chart says, "In 4," that means that pattern for the most part will repeat every four beats. If there is a strumming rhythm, it will typically repeat every four beats as well. If you have trouble counting to the music, here are some things that will help you.

1. Most songs emphasize the "1" beat. It's when most chords transition from one to another.

2. The snare drum (the very loud beat that you can hear easily on recordings) is usually the "2" and "4." The snare drum is that high pitched, loud drum that sits between the drummers knees. It sounds a bit like a clap.

Feel and Capo – If the song needs a capo, it will typically be denoted like "Capo 3," etc. This would mean that you would put the capo at the 3rd fret. Using a capo, "transposes" the actual chords. Often times, charts won't mention the feel of the song. (feel = what key the song feels like, for example – C or G major) That's no problem though. Just capo where requested and act as if the capo is the "nut" of the guitar.

If you move the capo to the 3rd fret, you will need to play your chords 3 frets higher than you would if you did not use a capo. I will often denote the feel of the song, especially if it's a "number" chart. This way you know what chord to play for the number represented. More on that later!

Groupings – Chords will be separated from each other when they represent a "measure." If a song is "In 4," you will see a chord separated by a space, and then another chord, etc. For a song like Carrie Underwood's, "Before He Cheats," each chord represents 4 beats. So there would be a total of 16 beats for the following chord progression (E- D C B7). If a measure has more than one chord in it, it's called a split measure and is denoted, by an underline.

For example, in the song "Hallelujah", by Rufus Wainwright and written by Leonard Cohen, the 10th measure of the verse is split, C D. Since this is still a measure of "4," "C" would get two beats and "D" would get two beats. In Feist's, "1.2.3.4.," the intro and verses are all split. Since that song is in 4, each chord would get two beats because they share the measure. Then in the chorus it would be back to our normal full measure of four beats per chord. Sometimes you will see "hash" marks over the chords if it's not an evenly split measure.

In Rascal Flatts' "What Hurts The Most" you will find an "uneven" measure, in the 1st bar (measure) of the bridge. The "C" chord would normally be held out for 3 beats, and the "D" for one beat, but we have yet another notation to consider. The "p" above the "D," means that you "push" the D chord. Basically, you just play it a little earlier than you would normally play it. To be exact, you play the "D" on the "and of 3" not on the 4. If we count 1+2+3+4+, the C is held for 1+2+3, and the D is played on the + of the 3 and held out for +4+. This last part is a bit complex, so if you don't get it right now, don't worry.

Come back to it though, because even though you won't run into it very often, you will hear a difference.

Inversions – Inversions are chords that have another note from that chord that is played in the bass, instead of the "root." A "C" chord has a C in the root. A "D" chord has a D in the root, etc. Sometimes you will see a chord symbol like "C/E" as we see in the 3rd measure of the chorus of The Beatles, "Eleanor Rigby". Simply put, this is a C chord with an "E" in the bass. Normally when we play a C chord, we mute the low E string (6th or thick string) with our thumb, or we don't strum it at all. That would produce a sonically correct "C." However, when a "/" chord is represented, that usually means that another instrument (usually the bass) is playing that low note, instead of the root of the chord (i.e. "C").

Other examples that you will see often times are G/B, which means a G chord, with a B in the bass (2nd fret/fifth string). C/G is C chord with a G in the bass (3 fret/6th string). D/F# is a D chord with an F# in the bass (2nd fret, 6th string). I like to reach my thumb around the neck and play that F# with my thumb (difficult for smaller hands). Often times you will have to change your fingering in order to produce this new inversion. If you don't quite get this section on inversions at first, don't worry. Learning is a process. Come back to it and eventually, it will make sense.

Also, whenever you see a "/" chord, you can safely play the chord to the left of the slash. If it's a

C/E, you just play the C. If it's a D/F#, you can just play the D. If you are playing with a bassist, he would usually play the lower notes and your ear won't be searching for it. If you are playing by yourself (solo guitar), you might find something "missing" with the chord if you don't include the lower note.

Number charts – Often times, studio musicians (especially in Nashville) will prefer a "number chart". These charts refer to numbers instead of letters. The reason that studio players like these types of charts is that they are easy to transpose (change keys). Refer to the colorful "number system matrix chart" for these examples. For "Hallelujah," the 1 represents the G and the 6 represents an E. However, there is a minus (-) after the E. That means that you make the E, an E- chord, instead of an E. The fifth measure of the verse is a 4, which in the key of G is a C chord.

The sixth measure is a 5, which in the key of G is a D chord. If we were in the studio and the singer wanted to try this in the key of C, instead of G, we wouldn't have to rewrite our charts. We would just have to "rethink" in the key or feel of C. In this scenario, the 1 would be a C, the 6- would be an A-, the 4 would be an F and the 5 would be a G. Another reason that we might want to change keys (other than the singer), is playing ease. This song is easier played with a G feel, so that our 5 chord is a D instead of an F (in the key of C).

However, in the 14th measure of the 1st verse, we find a 3-. In C, that would be an E-, which is an easy chord to play. In G, the 3- would be a B-, which is a bar chord and a more difficult chord to play. Using the capo helps us to limit bar chords, but sometimes they are unavoidable. Everything else however is consistent between number charts and standard charts. In a nutshell, number charts substitute numbers instead of letters.

Symbols and Notation – Since charts are condensed versions of actual music, there is often much left to the imagination. We can't hear a piece of music. It is lifeless, until a musician brings it to life! Symbols and notation help musicians get a better idea of what the composer or arranger wants, like road signs when we drive.

Since these are fairly impromptu and different from each chart writer to the next, sometimes you just have to use common sense. (i.e. if a chorus is followed by 3x, it typically signifies that you should play the chorus three times). However, you will see these symbols "[:" and ":]" or something similar fairly often. These denote a repeated section of music. If you were to see, "[: E- C G D:]," you would play E-, C, G and D and then repeat it. If the ":]" were followed by a 3x you would play for a total of three times.

How to practice – If you are still new to chords and moving between them, it's best to 1st practice your transitions. To do this, move your fretting hand (relax the strum hand) back and forth between two chords. Just toggle back and forth without strumming. Try this for a bit with all the chord transitions in a song. Once you get the left hand "working," you can strum to make

sure the chords sound nicely.

Remember that every great guitar player struggled with the same chords that you and I struggle with. DON'T GIVE UP!! Just be observant to your hands when you hear something that's not right. Once you have the transitions down, it's best to play the chord on the "1" and hold it out for the full measure or four beats (if the song is in 4). Often times this is called a "diamond." You will see this written in many of my charts when a chord is to be held out for a full measure.

Playing in "diamonds" will get your internal metronome (clock) in better sync with the music. Once you get the "feel" of diamonds, you can start strumming on each single beat. If you know what the strumming rhythms of the song is, you could then practice that, but not before getting the "diamonds" and single note strums down. Here is the breakdown for practicing these charts:

1. Transitions

2. Diamonds

3. Single beat strums – ¼ notes

4. Actual strumming rhythm of song

In summary, charts will allow you to play music that you have never played before. At first your reading will be slower, just like it was when you first learned to read a book. Then as the months and years progressed, so did your reading. Sooner than later, you will be able to look at a chart and play it correctly for the first time, just like reading a book. Practice, practice, practice and have fun!!

Remember... **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!** ...and ***HAVE FUN!***

Counting Song

IN 4 Capo 2 (C feel)

INT:	C G/B	A- F	C G/B	A- F
VRS:	C G/B	A- F	C G/B	A- F
	C D-	A- F	C D-	A- F
CHR:	G	F	G	F
VRS:	C G/B	A- F	C G/B	A- F
	C D-	A- F	C D-	A- F
CHR:	G	F	G	F
VRS:	C G/B	A- F	C G/B	A- F
	C D-	A- F	C D-	A- F

Big Cheater

IN 4 Capo (G feel)

INT:	E-	D	C	D
	E-	D	C	B_7
VRS:	E-	D	C	B_7
	E-	D	C	B_7
	E-	D	C	B_7
	A-	A-	B_7	B_7
CHR:	C	E-	C	E-
	C	E-	B_7	B_7
	C	E-	C	E-
	C	B_7		

TA:	**E-**	**D**	**C**	**B_7**
VRS: AGAIN				
CHR: AGAIN				
BRG:	**E-**	**E-**	**G**	**D**
	C	**C**	**A-**	**A-**
	B_7	**B_7**		
TA:	**E-**	**D**	**C**	**B_7**
	E-	**D**	**C**	**B_7**
CHR: AGAIN				

Big Cheater (Number System)

IN 4 Capo 2 (G feel)

INT:	**6-**	**5**	**4**	**5**
	6-	**5**	**4**	**3_7**
VRS:	**6-**	**5**	**4**	**3_7**
	6-	**5**	**4**	**3_7**
	6-	**5**	**4**	**3_7**
	2-	**2-**	**3_7**	**3_7**
CHR:	**4**	**6-**	**4**	**6-**
	4	**6-**	**3_7**	**3_7**
	4	**6-**	**4**	**6-**
	4	**3_7**		
TA:	**6-**	**5**	**4**	**3_7**

VRS: AGAIN				
CHR: AGAIN				
BRG:	**6-**	**6-**	**1**	**5**
	4	**4**	**2-**	**2-**
	3_7	**3_7**		
TA:	**6-**	**5**	**4**	**3_7**
	6-	**5**	**4**	**3_7**
CHR: AGAIN				

Hurry

IN 6 Cap 5 (G feel)

INT:	**G**	**E-**	**G**	**E-**
VRS:	**G**	**E-**	**G**	**E-**
	C	**D**	**G**	**D**
	G	**C D**	**E-**	**C**
	D	**B-**	**E-**	**E-**
CHR:	**C**	**C**	**E-**	**E-**
	C	**C**	**G**	**D**
	G	**D**		
Verse and chorus 3x total , then				

VRS:	**G**	**E-**	**G**	**E-**
	C	**D**	**G**	**D**
	G	**C D**	**E-**	**C**
	D	**B-**	**E-**	**E-**
CHR4:	**C**	**C**	**E-**	**E-**
	C	**C**	**G**	**D**
	C	**C**	**E-**	**E-**
	C	**C**	**G**	**D**
	G			

Hurry (Number System)

IN 6 Capo 5 (G feel)

INT:	**1**	**6-**	**1**	**6-**
VRS:	**1**	**6-**	**1**	**6-**
	4	**5**	**1**	**5**
	1	**4 5**	**6-**	**4**
	5	**3-**	**6-**	**6-**
CHR:	**4**	**4**	**6-**	**6-**
	4	**4**	**1**	**5**
	1	**5**		

Verse and chorus 2x, then

VRS:	**1**	**6-**	**1**	**6-**
	4	**5**	**1**	**5**
	1	**4 5**	**6-**	**4**
	5	**3-**	**6-**	**6-**
CHR4:	**4**	**4**	**6-**	**6-**
	4	**4**	**1**	**5**
	4	**4**	**6-**	**6-**
	4	**4**	**1**	**5**
	1			

Ellen

IN 4

INT:	**[:C**	**C**	**E-**	**E-:]**
VRS:	**E-**	**E-**	**E-**	**C**
	C E-	**E-**	**E-**	**E-**
	C	**C E-**		
CHR:	**[:E-7**	**E-6**	**C/E**	**E-:]**
VRS:	**E-**	**E-**	**E-**	**C**
	C E-	**E-**	**E-**	**E-**
	C	**C E-**		

CHR:	[:E-7	E-6	C/E	E-:]
INT:	[:C	C	E-	E-:]
VRS:	E-	E-	E-	C
	C E-	E-	E-	E-
	C	C E-		
CHR:	[:E-7	E-6	C/E	E-:]

Hurts

IN 4 (Capo 1 G feel)

INT:	[:E-	D	C	C:]
VRS:	E-	D	C	C
	E-	D	C	C
	C	C D	E-	E- D
	C	C	C	D
CRS:	E-	E- D	C	C
	G	G	D	D
	E-	E- D	C	C
	G	G	DSUS	D
TA:	E-	D	C	C

Verse and Chorus again, Then bridge

	III p			
BRG:	C D	D	C	
SOLO:	E-	E- D	C	C D
	E-	D	C	C
CRS:	E-	E- D	C	C
	G	G	D	D
	E-	E- D	C	C
	G	G	DSUS	D
	C	C	DSUS	D

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Number System Chart

Major	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Quality	Maj	Min	Min	Maj	Maj	Min	Dim
Key of A	A	B-	C#-	D	E	F#-	G#°
Key of B	B	C#-	D#-	E	F#	G#-	A#°
Key of C	C	D-	E-	F	G	A-	B°
Key of D	D	E-	F#-	G	A	B-	C#°
Key of E	E	F#-	G#-	A	B	C#-	D#°
Key of F	F	G-	A-	Bb	C	D-	E°
Key of G	G	A-	B-	C	D	E-	F#°
Minor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Quality	Min	Dim	Maj	Min	Min	Maj	Maj
Key of A-	A-	B°	C	D-	E-	F	G
Key of B-	B-	C#°	D	E-	F#-	G	A
Key of C-	C-	D°	Eb	F-	G-	Ab	Bb
Key of D-	D-	E°	F	G-	A-	Bb	C
Key of E-	E-	F#°	G	A-	B-	C	D
Key of F-	F-	G°	Ab	Bb-	C-	Db	Eb
Key of G-	G-	A°	Bb	C-	D-	Eb	F